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SUMMARY

11. (U) International Crisis Group's (ICG) Northeast Asia Project Director Peter Beck said that North Korean refugees, predominantly in China but increasingly going to Southeast Asia, need from USD 1,000 to 10,000 to get out of North Korea and live a very precarious "cat and mouse" existence after they do, fearing that they will be caught and sent back to North Korea. Beck said his group's research, starting in early 2006, did not point to a strong desire among refugees to go the United States, but that information about the North Korea Human Rights Act was still being disseminated. ICG's "North Korea Refugees" report should be published by mid-October. End Summary.

NO RELIABLE NUMBERS

12. (U) ICG's Peter Beck led off his presentation to about 100 mostly expatriates at a Royal Asiatic Society gathering on September 12 by saying that even after nine months of intensive research, ICG had no firm handle on the number of North Korean refugees. Beck said his sense was that about half of the refugees were unintended: they had gone to China to visit family, find food, or work temporarily. But they

had then grown fearful about going back to the DPRK and perhaps being apprehended -- which Beck said could lead to no punishment, years of imprisonment in a detention facility such as Yodok, or even execution.

¶3. (U) The other half of the refugees left the DPRK intending to go to the ROK or a third country. While ICG did not know how many refugees there were, it was clearer how much they paid: between USD 1,000 and 10,000 to escape. The average, about USD 2,000, was an "unimaginable sum" for most North Koreans, few of whom could pay to evade internal travel restrictions within North Korea. Of those who had the needed funds, most crossed to China, where border guards on both sides were notorious for accepting bribes. One refugee, who wanted to return to North Korea temporarily to see family, brought two cases of whisky and handed out bottles at each checkpoint on the way in and back out. The border with Russia was easy to cross but refugees found Russia inhospitable so they avoided it. Increasing numbers of refugees were finding their way to Southeast Asia, especially Thailand. Recent arrests there would spook some refugees, but amounted to local officials responding to complaints rather than a shift in Thailand's policy.

¶4. (U) Beck described, leaving out any details, what he called a sophisticated underground railroad leading from China to South Korea or elsewhere. Brokers who run the system range from sincere missionaries to businessmen making money to human traffickers.

¶5. (U) Beck estimated that about 70 percent of the refugees were women, for reasons not fully understood. All refugees lived a "cat and mouse" existence, seeking to avoid border guards, police, or even other people who could betray them with one phone call. But women faced the additional hazard of possibly being trafficked into prostitution or sold as

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"picture brides." The flipside was that some women intentionally relied on prostitution to support themselves. Many had also married Chinese men, which Beck claimed would lead to complicated issues for the ROK, since these refugees would want to bring their husbands and sometimes children to South Korea with them.

¶6. (U) While noting that the ICG report covers the refugees' situation outside of the ROK, Beck said that there were reasons to believe that more and more refugees would start trying to come to South Korea, perhaps overwhelming the system that he said is now at capacity with about 2,000 refugees expected to be accepted this year. The report will argue that the biggest factor drawing refugees to South Korea is that other family members have done so. That implies that each contingent of refugees reaching South Korea will have a gravitational pull attracting even more members of extended families. Some communication back to North Korea was possible either through brokers, or through Chinese cellphones used near the Northern border.

¶7. (U) Asked whether China feared a vast increase in the number of refugees coming from North Korea, Beck said no, because the DPRK population centers are in the south, and relatively few North Koreans have the means to go north. Asked why the DPRK does not control the borders to prevent flight, Beck said that the DPRK lacked the resources to effectively control the border with China. He recounted crossing the Yalu river by boat with a guide to talk to North Korean border guards, who suggested that if he threw a bit of money onto the shore, he could wander into North Korea and talk to people; Beck refused on security grounds.

¶8. (U) Asked about the impact of the North Korea Human Rights Act, Beck said that his group's research starting in early 2006 did not find refugees mentioning the Act, and that few mentioned wanting to go to the United States. He suggested that information about the Act was still being disseminated into refugee networks.

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